

## Conversations in a Pandemic

**C. Russell Y. Cruz, MD, PhD**  
Associate Editor, Telegraft

*"Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world.  
All things break. And all things can be mended.  
Not with time, as they say, but with intention.  
So go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally.  
The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you."*

- L.R. Knost

### **You may not know it yet, but the world needs to hear from you.**

It is probably a safe bet that you are here, at the bleeding edge of science and medicine, because you are an idealist who wants to make the world a better place. And a better place is far from where we are. We are in the midst of a pandemic that has exposed the ugly cracks of our imperfect world: unprepared and uncoordinated governments, divisions that thrive in the face of a common enemy, and a parallel spread of dangerous misinformation.

One of the few bright lights? The extraordinary scientific productivity in full display, as scientists work tirelessly to help make a cure and a vaccine. This is how some of you are carrying out your vocations, as you make the world a better place because of the therapies you are helping make. It might not occur to most of you that you can make it better now (and once this is all over) by sharing a bit of yourself as well.

In this time of isolation, the *Telegraft* is seeking to bring its members, their patients, and their communities closer together. We will be featuring COVID19 science, scientists, and stories in a special section. At the same time, we will be providing a channel, *Reports from the Front Lines #ISCTTogether*, to allow us to help colleagues around the world by sharing experiences, stories, reflections, obstacles, solutions, and moments of inspiration from the frontlines and home offices. But like our namesake (the telegraph) we would simply be making meaningless dots and dashes if there were no people speaking at and listening on both ends. So, we are asking you to be part of this effort by sharing your expertise and experience with your peers and with the rest of the world. We are asking you to speak up.

### **Speak up because your colleagues need to feel connected with you.**

Connections that helped keep us going have now been severed by social distancing and work from home arrangements. Severed connections (which used to keep much of the economy going) have led to furloughs for millions. As a result, there is a lot of anxiety and fear.<sup>1</sup>

Research has found that a constant exposure to positive emotions equips us with a better ability to cope with hardship.<sup>2</sup> These positive emotions can come from sources like learning about how others cope, and finding substitutes for fake news.

Sharing what we are going through makes us feel that we are not alone - that other people are experiencing the same things we are. Laboratories in hibernation, worries about getting infected while doing our essential tasks, anxieties about future funding cycles --- sharing this will be therapeutic to the person sharing it (acting as a form of journaling, which has reported benefits to mental and physical well-being)<sup>3</sup> and the person receiving it (who is now aware that their situation is also shared by someone else).

Conspiracy theories abound in social media, and it is causing people grief and added stress. As scientists, we are in a unique position to put out more positive musings that may just help drown these out. Do not be afraid to think out loud: think of ways we can combat this virus, or future versions of it. Because you have been surrounded by hypothesis after hypothesis, creative solution after creative solution, your subconscious is ripe for a crazy idea that may just help us get to a cure. Do not be afraid to share it: You never know if someone, somewhere, has the means to make your life-saving idea happen.

We are keen to hear about stories and insights like these from our members; distancing need not turn to isolation.

### **Speak up because the world needs your skepticism and your optimism.**

The world is unfamiliar with something we take so much for granted: the skepticism we have for all knowledge. Our mind has been trained to doubt, to critically appraise data, to be cautious about over interpreting them and succumbing to handwaving conjecture. This is what the world needs to see right now, and learn from. This is what helps curb the spread of misinformation. Questioning stories from unreliable sources, from biased sources, from sources with conflicts of interest. Analyzing what the data actually says vs what people want it to say. Reading the scientific articles that a headline is based on, so that one would know how reliable the interpretation is.

This skepticism is paradoxically balanced by an uncanny optimism. Scientists have (with apologies to Bertrand Russell) "learned to live with uncertainty, without being paralyzed by indecision." Scientists see are more aware of what we don't know more than anybody else, but we still believe that we can stretch the boundaries of knowledge; we believe that we can find the next cure.

Share this side of you. Tell the world that there is reason to worry and that this pandemic should be with the seriousness it deserves. But don't forget to tell them that help is on the way.

You need not look far to see how effective this combination of skepticism and optimism is – a ubiquitous presence across all media platforms is Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. For many people, the expected contrarians

notwithstanding, his presence on the coronavirus taskforce is a source of comfort. His words reflect one of his favorite Jesuit quotes: “precision of thought, economy of expression.”<sup>4</sup>

Imagine a world where this way of thinking predominates. Differences can be settled through discussion instead of hostility. There would be less chance of ill-advised decisions.

**But here’s the rub: decisions are only made by those who show up.** True, showing up can be difficult and painful. But that pain need not be yours alone. You belong to a bigger scientific community, and a society of like-minded experts within the ISCT. And this Society’s communications arm, the *Telegraft*, is here for your communication needs.

So to you, the idealist slaving away to build a better future: speak, shout, share. Send us words that we can amplify to the public or deliver to colleagues who need to feel connected. Stop holding your peace --- you never know who else may need this peace more.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>

<sup>2</sup> Garland EL, Fredrickson B, Kring AM, Johnson DP, Meyer PS, Penn DL. Upward spirals of positive emotions counter downward spirals of negativity: insights from the broaden-and-build theory and affective neuroscience on the treatment of emotion dysfunctions and deficits in psychopathology. Clin Psychol Rev. 2010 Nov;30(7):849-64. doi: 10.1016/j.cpr.2010.03.002. Epub 2010 Mar 12. PMID: 20363063; PMCID: PMC2908186.

<sup>3</sup> Francis ME, Pennebaker JW. Putting stress into words: the impact of writing on physiological, absentee, and self-reported emotional well-being measures. Am J Health Promot. 1992;6(4):280–287. doi:10.4278/0890-1171-6.4.280

<sup>4</sup> <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/06/20080619-9.html>